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ABSTRACT

The Colorado workplace program completed an open-ended program evaluation that examined the following: how people involved in workplace learning change, what the shape of that change is, and what impact that change may have. It explored the perspectives of two groups closely involved in the workplace learning process: participants and their supervisors. Data were gathered from 30 supervisors in 6 companies through an open-ended questionnaire that asked them to comment on general perceptions related to training outcomes. Data from 26 learners were collected using "action cards" and "conversation logs" that learners completed in classes. According to the data, 89 percent of learners reported making specific changes in the context of the workplace. A surprisingly high frequency (47.2 percent) of learners reported at least one account of application of learning with their families or in the community. Supervisors reported that participants demonstrated improvements in three key areas: more effective communication; taking on of more responsibility; and demonstration of improved skills on the job. Data collected from learners provided support for the these findings. Another major employee theme involved improvements in attitudes about relationships and work. Analysis of supervisor data revealed that workplace learning resulted in organizational impact in four categories: improved employee flexibility and teamwork; improved customer service; improved "learning environment"; and increased employee retention. (YLB)

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# WORKFORCE SKILLS

Newsletter of
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COLORADO
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*Over 2,000 learners at 15 Colorado firms participated in workplace learning last year. What impact does it have on the employers and employees?*

## WORKPLACE LEARNING: REPORTS OF CHANGE FROM SUPERVISORS AND LEARNERS

*by Mary Crabbe Gershwin, Colorado Workplace Learning Director*

*Sometimes we learn the most from the unexpected and the unanticipated. Sir Alexander Fleming inadvertently left a bacteria culture unattended but paid attention to the results anyway. When the mold killed much of the bacteria, he used this information to invent penicillin.*

Like Fleming in his lab, we may learn some of our most important lessons when we stop to attend to what is simply unfolding before our eyes. With this broader goal in mind, the Colorado workplace program has completed an open-ended program evaluation designed to explore the greater implications of workplace learning.

- 89% of learners report making specific changes in the context of the workplace. Examples of work-related change are typified by the following account from a learner.

  *"At my job I am trying to take an extra moment to 'listen' instead of respond. I am finding that by doing this, the customer (patient/Dr./staff) is likely to provide more information."*

- A surprisingly high frequency (47.2%) of learners report at least one account of application of learning with their families or in the community.

  *My action was "to start giving positive feedback to my kids and other peers...I noticed they wanted more attention/love from me; listening improved a little bit."*

### *The Workplace Research Question*

The question we asked was a broad and simple one: What changes have you observed that are associated with workplace learning? We want to know how people involved in workplace learning change (if indeed they do); what is the shape of that change; and what is the impact that change may have.

### *The Methods and Sample*

Our study examined workplace learning in companies located in three Colorado communities: a large city, a small city, and a rural town. We examined change by exploring the perspectives of two groups of people who have close involvement in the workplace learning process: the participants and their supervisors.

Supervisor data was gathered from 30 supervisors in six companies. We used an open ended questionnaire which asked supervisors to comment on general perceptions related to training outcomes. When we collected the data the program had been in operation for nine to 12 months.

The methods used to collect data from learners were more intensive than typical interview or survey methods. The documents we examined were "action cards" and "conversation

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*"At my job I am trying to take an extra moment to 'listen' instead of respond. I am finding that by doing this, the customer is likely to provide more information."*

**Workplace Learning** *continued from page 1*

logs" which learners complete in their classes. We collected learner data from twenty-six students: each student had completed a minimum of three planning documents. (For a full explanation of action cards, see ***Workforce Skills***, Spring, 1996.)

## *THE FINDINGS*

Analysis of the data provides insight into three interesting workplace questions:

In what settings do participants apply learning?

- What kinds of application do learners make?
- What difference does workplace learning make to organizations that sponsor the training?

## *THE SETTINGS*

Learners in our sample were most likely to make specific changes in their behavior in the workplace setting. 89% of learners report making specific changes in the context of the workplace. Examples of work-related change are typified by the following account from a learner.

- *"At my job I am trying to take an extra moment to 'listen' instead of respond. I am finding that by doing this, the customer (patient/Dr./staff) is likely to provide more information."*

Specific kinds of applications reported are explored more fully below under "Workplace Trends".

**INDIVIDUAL CHANGE**

| Behavior | Attitude |
|---|---|
| • Learners Communicate more effectively and openly to supervisors, coworkers and customers.<br>• Learners take on more responsibility<br>• Learners demonstrate improved skills | Learners exhibit greater:<br>• Openness to new information and new ideas<br>• Awareness of needs of others<br>• Willingness to accept change<br>• Increased interest in tasks |

**ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT**

- **Improved Teamwork**
- **Improved Customer Service**
- **Improved Learning Environment**
- **Increased Employee Retention**

## *APPLICATION IN THE HOME/COMMUNITY SETTING*

A surprisingly high frequency (47.2%) of learners report at least one account of application of learning with their families or [illegible] community. Even though the classes were held at the work-site and designed explicitly to address needs in the context of work, for many participants, the first place they try out new skills is with the people they know the best. For example, one student reported on how she used "giving positive feedback" with her children:

- *"(My action was) to start giving positive feedback to my kids and other peers.... I noticed they wanted more attention/love from me; listening improved a little bit."*

## *WORKPLACE TRENDS*

Eighty-nine percent of learners are making changes in the context of work: what exactly are these changes, and what impact do they have? Analysis of both supervisor and learner data reveal changes in behavior and attitude on the job.

## *INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIORAL CHANGE*

According to supervisors, workplace learning participants demonstrate improvements in three key areas:

- they communicate more effectively,
- they take on more responsibility, and
- they demonstrate improved skills on the job.

The first theme exhibited within the context of change among employee learners is that they communicate more effectively and openly with coworkers, supervisors, and customers. Supervisors discuss changes in communication in great depth and describe the specific ways employees are adapting their communication as a result of training:

- *"... employees are more participative in meetings, whether formal or informal. Employees are more willing to give me feedback due to their greater ability to communicate."*
- *"I believe the classes enabled the reps. to better handle customers. There were fewer transfer calls to the manager."*
- *"Through the classroom discussions, it seems that some have opened up and feel better about approaching employees and managers to ask questions and communicate."*

**Workplace Learning** *continued on page 6*

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Data collected from learners provides support for the supervisor on behavioral change to improve relationships. Participants report using skills to build relationships both at home and in the workplace. Below is an example of how a participant reported the process of improving communication on the job:

- *"'You're always yakking' - a comment made to me a few times with a smile but I didn't know how to interpret it. I complimented his work efficiency and then asked him directly "are you teasing me or does my talking (yakking) bother you?" He replied, I'm teasing." I let him know I like to socialize, but the majority of the time, I'm discussing schedule, projects etc. It helped. I didn't feel judged (like I was a time waster) ... I feel we both support each other as co-workers."*

### *Taking on Responsibility*

The second theme of employee change relates to learners taking on more responsibility. Both supervisors and learners cite specific ways in which training is associated with greater initiative and involvement. Below are samples of some supervisor comments:

- *"(They) are more willing to aid others in the training process."*
- *"I think they have each been more responsive to the job demands in the whole department."*
- *"I have had volunteers take on Junior Achievement."*
- *"Many of those participating are thinking about going back to school part-time to earn a degree. For those who have participated, it has made a difference in their lives."*
- *"(Employees are taking on)... more math responsibilities."*

Employee documents also reveal a trend toward increased initiative. Learner examples of initiative are often refreshingly concrete:

- *"I was cleaning up the dumpster and thought of a way to do a better job. I told my boss if he would get me a rake and a flat shovel I could clean under the ramp. He said he would try and get them for me."*

### *Increased Skills on the Job*

Finally, supervisor reports and learner documents indicate that employees who participate in workplace learning demonstrate greater skill on the job. Below are some comments from supervisors that illustrate this finding:

- *"The single most important (change) is giving each student the tools necessary to do the job."*
- *"More willing to write and do so more effectively."*
- *"More effective report writing."*

Learners themselves describe how they bring new skills to real situations. Below is an example of how a learner applied newly developed skills in the context of personal relationships.

- *"My wife and I had several arguments due to communication differences. The problem was money handling... it evolved because of the different ways we looked at it. So, I actively listened to her, which showed my interest and enabled me to make her see what I was saying... I put myself in her shoes."*

### *Attitudinal Change*

Another major employee theme involved improvements in attitudes about relationships and work. According to the supervisors, employees exhibit greater openness to new information and new ideas, awareness of the needs of others, willingness to accept change, and increased interest in tasks. Supervisor comments include:

- *"Employees involved in classes seem to be more open to new ideas."*
- *"(Employees are) more interested in working together to solve a problem."*
- *"People seem to be more aware of other people's feelings and points of view."*
- *"(Employees are) more open to new ideas, more enthusiastic and interested in tasks.*
- *"Employees now like to extend themselves to help others."*

### *Changes in Reflection*

Learners themselves rarely discuss change in terms of attitude. Rather, they frequently reflect upon how they experience the process of using new skills. Learners discuss awareness of their own behavior, changes in the behaviors of others, and an emerging sense of noticing change. Some of these reflective accounts are in specific contexts:

- *"I had to give directions to my son-in-law to help me put a clutch in my truck. I found that being more explicit in my directions made it go smoother."*

In General, many of the action cards reflected a new awareness of communication patterns.

- *"This week I ..."listened to people without interrupting them. It took a conscious effort not to interrupt."*

## *ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT*

Analysis of supervisor data reveals that workplace learning resulted in organizational impact in four categories: (1)improved employee flexibility and teamwork; (2) improved customer service; (3) improved "learning environment"; and (4)increased employee retention.

### *Improved Employee Flexibility and Teamwork*

Supervisors report that workplace learning produces a climate of teamwork and flexibility.

- *"Teamwork has improved as people have learned to express their needs and listen more carefully to others... We need the combined talents of all our workforce. People with low self-esteem find it very difficult to participate fully in that kind of a team environment. When I say the program increases self-esteem, I am saying it truly increases the employee's usefulness to the organization."*
- *"... classes have fostered a better spirit of cooperation between employees to get the job done now and better teamwork."*
- *"It is difficult to measure camaraderie. Certainly there is improved communication among administrative group making it more pleasant to work here."*
- *"Before workplace learning, people from different departments just never talked to each other. They expected the supervisors to do all the interdepartmental communication. They didn't understand their role in the larger team and the need for interdepartmental communication. Now the employees talk frequently across departments and solve problems without even involving the supervisors."*

### *Improved Customer Service*

Improving customer service is another organizational theme that emerged in the supervisor interviews. For many organizations, this means that workplace learning contributes to a significant bottom-line concern.

- *"I have not had a single complaint in the last two and a half months concerning telephone etiquette. In the past, I received approximately five calls a month from various hospital departments concerning how our laboratory staff would answer phones. As I walk through the laboratory, I have noticed a marked improvement in the manner with which our staff conducts phone conversations."*

### *Improved "Learning Environment"*

As businesses become more interested in becoming "Learning Organizations", the need for developing employee participation and learning grows. Supervisors report that workplace learning strengthens the learning process

- *"It has enhanced our training programs considerably."*
- *"There is a positive 'learning environment' impact."*

### *Improved Employee Retention*

Supervisors report that workplace learning improves employee retention. As the labor market grows tighter, keeping good employees becomes increasingly imperative. One company reports that it has seen such a dramatic relationship between training and long term employment that it plans an in-depth study of that relationship.

- *"I believe that it if it weren't for the Workplace Learning Project the employees that I have would no longer be working here...."*
- *"Workplace learning participants are more likely to be retained. Employees who participate in the program have a 21% higher retention rate than those who don't. When it costs us $5900 to hire and train a new employee, we know this program saves our company a lot of money."*

## *SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS*

These results suggest that workplace learning unleashes changes in the workplace, in families and in communities. The changes primarily relate to improved relationships, initiative, involvement and long-term employment. For organizations, these changes translate into meaningful improvements in bottom-line concerns such as customer service and employee retention.

Our next steps will involve more detailed analysis of retention and workplace learning. For more information on this study and workplace learning in Colorado, please call Mary Crabbe Gershwin or C. Patricia Tank at 303-595-1608.

***"Before workplace learning, people from different departments just never talked to each other... Now the employees talk frequently across departments and solve problems without even involving the supervisors."***



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